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GETTING AND FORGETTING AN EDUCATION

ROBERT MACDONALD LESTER

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Commencement Address
University of New Mexico
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ROBERT MACDONALD LESTER, M.A., LITT.D., LL.D., D.C.L.
Secretary of the Carnegie Corporation

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GETTING AND FORGETTING AN EDUCATION

ROBERT MACDONALD LESTER

Mr. President,
Your Excellency the Governor,
Members of the Graduating Class of 1936,
Members of the Board,
Members of the Faculty,
Ladies and Gentlemen—

The academic ceremony which we practice here this morning, in this historic place, commemorates man's first efforts to transmit the fruits of his wisdom and experience to his successors. In modern terms, it signalizes the completion of another academic period at the University of New Mexico, and the end of at least sixteen studious years for those who are to be graduated here today under the aegis of this institution. Similar events reaching back through recorded and traditional history of the human race, have been held in unending continuity, under scholastic, ecclesiastical, religious, tribal, and family auspices. Each has had for its purpose to recognize publicly the termination of a course of training through which selected representatives of a younger generation are made ready to be leaders in society. So, here this morning, in the midst of this modern city of Albuquerque, itself an expression of the new scientific age in which all of us are novices, we clothe ourselves in medieval draperies to perpetuate an ancient custom.

The members of this graduating class, through their years under elementary, secondary, and collegiate instruction, have absorbed to a satisfactory degree those principles and precepts through the practice of which they expect to be regarded as educated men. Since childhood their days have been charted towards a college degree as marking the end of the educational process. But, alas, such is not the reality. The end is not yet, nor will it ever be.

For long generations, man crept slowly from point to point of progressive civilization, handing down to his children his record of the past as a foundation upon which to shape the future, but we in this convocation, because of the development of physical and biological science, chiefly during the last fifty years, are forced to rely more upon the present and future than upon past experience. We are probably more remote from our grandfathers of 1836 than our grandfathers were from the first man in recorded history. Repetitive society, recreating itself generation by generation after established and inherited patterns, no longer prevails. Ours is the singular position of pioneers in an old world, armed as never man was before not only with physical endurance and spiritual courage but also with engines fired by powers of the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth. Through scientific discoveries we have appropriated mighty forces which even one generation ago were regarded as lawless, supernatural or destructive, and have made them servants and ministers to our comfort. These fruits and goods are available to the rich man, and also to the laborer in the field, but the time is not ripe, nor will it ever be, to say, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry," for progress brings increased obligation and responsibility. The major things of the mind and of culture must be supplied continuously with life; they must be forever renewed.

This scientific or mechanical age, call it as you will, has forced those of us who follow education to revise our thinking. No longer can it be considered that the attainment of a degree, be it Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctor's, indicates an educated man, full-panoplied for the business of life. At best it can signify only that the graduate possesses a mind carefully trained towards the making of critical judgments. Education, we now admit, is continuous from birth to death, and must always project itself ahead. "The education of youth," one authority says, "is a forward-looking process,

one looking to a time when things will be different. With the rate at which knowledge changes all the way from physics to economics, it is important that the student's attention be directed to the *foundations of knowledge* through use of which new materials are being discovered, or will be discovered, and which will develop in him the proper attitude of mind relative to *movement of knowledge* for the most active part of his life." Knowledge moves, and to stop one's education is to become uneducated.

The process by which men and women beyond the school age endeavor to keep in touch with a changing world, thus preparing themselves for their destiny and their possibilities is today commonly called adult education. The term "adult education" in books, magazines, newspapers, and even in conversation has become almost a catchword, but the idea is not merely of passing interest—a nine-day wonder; it is one of the most important issues of modern life. To this never-ending process, to its basis and background, I wish to call the attention of this class today.

In the United States the origins of adult, or continuing education, are easily found. There was the New England town meeting of the seventeenth century. Benjamin Franklin at the College of Philadelphia and Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia foresaw in their own time the need for educational programs which do not exclude those who daily wrestle with realities. Then later came the lyceum movement, in which Emerson (leaving his pulpit), Lowell, Holmes, and Thoreau played important parts, and the Chautauqua Institution, with imitators in commercial chautauquas, lyceums, and lecture courses. Correspondence schools started early. A half century ago university extension began; later came Carnegie benefactions for libraries. As a result of all these there developed in the United States before 1914 an interest in out-of-school education such as has hardly appeared in any great nation.

Meanwhile other influences, more easily traceable, were at work. Tax-supported schools were extended until the

dominating feature of the American community scene was no longer the weather-vane of an awkward wooden church but the red brick community schoolhouse. The compulsory school age was pushed forward, a series of vocational extensions set up, with subsequent development, in many places, of the voluntary evening high school for adults. Schools and colleges once regarded as chiefly preparatory, vocational, and for the indoctrination of faith, became places of training for democracy and for meeting the demands of a modern industrial civilization. The development of habits, attitudes, and appreciation became more and more a task, not of the home, but of the school. In the school itself, teachers of the old regime, trusting in all too little learning and with some of the oriental scholar's prejudice against manual labor, found themselves suddenly almost working side by side with a new type of teacher who delighted in handicraft or in acquaintance with cooking and housekeeping, crop rotation, breeding of animals, selection of seeds, study of pests, soil analysis, etc. To dig, he was not ashamed.

A glance at enrollment statistics is startling. In 1900, the enrollment in public high schools was 500,000; in 1928, nearly 4,000,000. College students increased in like proportion. The increase in high school pupils from 1920 to 1926 alone was more than 70 per cent. Such changes indicate a tremendous revolution in later adult attitudes. The pupil has begun to realize that education is a part of life, and that it pays.

Now, what has been happening in life in the United States in the last fifty years? It is not our place to discuss here today what has happened during the past six years. New codes, new deals, new eras, seem to be manufactured and announced from day to day. The world is always just being saved in the nick of time. But history shows us that even if we do save the world in one generation, it won't stay saved very long. But we have during the past fifty years been forced to change our ways. Many things have con-

tributed to this change, but above all else, the increase of industrial power and mass production, peculiarly American phenomena, have thrown us into a new world. Ours has become a civilization based upon technology.

Some person fond of figures has found that the census of 1869 showed that the average American man, woman, and child had the power equivalent of 12 slaves; in 1929 each had the equivalent of 175 slaves. In 1896, 50 per cent of the total available power was in the use of animals; now 97½ per cent is mechanical. Mechanization has so increased production that we could make all the steel needed in America for use during a single prosperous year in 7½ months; all the boots, shoes, textiles, and coal in 6 months. One-quarter of our working population in 1930 were at jobs which did not exist 25 years ago; within 100 years 300 occupations have been altogether supplanted. In one city of 50,000 population, there were found 400 ways of making a living. Seasonal and long drawn out unemployment, emphasis on workers under 40 years of age, reduction of hours of labor from 10 to 6 hours—all should make us realize that the machine in industry has changed life.

Then, too, man has used machinery to provide himself with ready access to ideas and information. The effectiveness of the printing press, telephone and telegraph, the automobile, highways, the rural free delivery, moving pictures and radio, serves to break down geographical barriers, to diminish time and space, and to complicate life in almost unbelievable ways for worker, business man, and professional man.

Another element peculiarly American, and more evident than ever before, is that distinctions between the so-called working class, middle class, and upper class are purely temporary in reference to individuals. Intellectual capacity and ability to make the economic grade serve to transfer a man from one class to another. The son of the farmer, the butcher, the baker, and of the street cleaner, garbage man, ditch digger, may, if it is in him, become the

lawyer, doctor, or business magnate of tomorrow. Though disputed by many, this freedom to shift from class to class is more than a national or democratic pose. It has had a profound effect upon our national civilization; it has furnished a compelling impulse toward scholastic and continuing education.

Here, for a moment, let us take stock of our educational progress. Our system of schooling, organized from the bottom up, from elementary school to college and university, is based upon the theory that the people, who are supposed to be the final authority in government, shall be educationally prepared and intellectually fitted to exercise sovereign power. But we must admit that our elementary task has not yet been accomplished. To be specific—no longer is it true, if it ever was true—as was believed in the time of Andrew Jackson, that the duties of government are so plain and simple that men of ordinary intelligence and training can easily qualify for their performance. The control, supervision and operation of banks, railroads, airways, highways, insurance, industry, credit, exchange, health, education—in fact of nearly everything which affects the life of our people generally—has in greater or less degree become an essential part of our government; and such activities require expert service regardless of political control or party connection. The non-expert citizen, if our system of government is to stand, must be so well educated and informed that he can understand and judge critically issues of local, national, and international importance. Otherwise, our government falls. Observant Americans, conscious of their government and its problems, believe that for the proper functioning of the state through political processes there is necessary a continuing education of citizens in order that the nation may profit from enlightened opinions of voters to assist in world peace, domestic security, and, equally important, in individual satisfactions. The first president of our country said in his first message to Congress:

> Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness.

And in his Farewell Address he said:

> In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.

Our educational ceiling is low. England, Scotland, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland are recorded as more literate than the United States. Groups under-privileged in education exist here and there in large areas of the land. The foreign-born in our great cities, the negro in the South, the mountaineer, the Spanish-and-Mexican American in the Southwest, the American Indian, though they have long been with us, are as yet receiving only the minimum of attention. Many states do not at this time have sufficient elementary school facilities for their citizens. The question of providing educational opportunities for the under-privileged, however, cannot be our sole concern. Adult education is not concerned chiefly with righting an educational wrong or with securing for the under-privileged what has been withheld.

Such provision for elementary education for the under-privileged adult and youth, vital though it is, will not meet the needs of today. Schools can give only schooling (or information); education must be mixed and seasoned with life experience (or wisdom). Adult education begins when a man finds himself; it continues until his ambition ceases to function. The most startling condition with which adults are now faced is the rapidity with which so-called educated people lose much of what they once learned. It isn't simply because they forget. The field of knowledge undergoes kaleidoscopic changes. Chemistry, physics, astronomy, electricity, biology, economics, history, as taught in the best colleges three decades ago, have passed out of date like the Conestoga wagon. A college graduate of twenty years standing has a merry time trying to keep himself in tune;

of his formal education he shows hardly a chemical trace. No fixed terminus is in sight for either the uneducated or the educated. It may be held as true that an educated man *must strive constantly* to *get* and *to forget* his education.

No matter how well trained an intelligent person may be, he has continually to adapt himself to the requirements of his trade or profession, but as a thinking man he is equally faced with the question, as Walt Whitman put it, "Shall a man lose himself in countless masses of adjustments, and be so shaped in reference to this, that, or the other, that the simply good, worthy, and brave parts of him are reduced and clipped away like the bordering of box in a garden?"

We adults must keep on learning. There is no question of the ability of adults to learn at various age levels. Educational leaders and social philosophers now agree that, for citizen and nation, much depends on the wise use of leisure.

What educational activities in out-of-work hours actually enlist the interest of adults today? Correspondence schools still sell millions of dollars worth of courses each year —as much as the total school budgets of a dozen states—to hundreds of thousands of people—to fully as many as in all our colleges, universities, and professional schools together. Public libraries, despite greatly reduced services, are being used as never before. Women's clubs, parent-teacher organizations, lyceums, chautauquas, university extension, museums, YMCA, YMHA, K of C, music and dramatic organizations, forums, discussion groups, reading courses, training courses by great industries for their employees, all are distinct efforts during leisure hours to meet specific adult education needs. In the background is a consciousness that literacy, and even a mere college education, is inadequate, and does not give information enough to promise personal satisfaction, social stability, or the promotion of civilization.

To the members of this graduating class:

Your education has given you an insight into the treasures of literature and language; it has grounded you ade-

quately in science, if you wished such; it has given you the opportunity to learn how cultured men and women behave. You are emerging today just a bit hazy as to what line of endeavor you are prepared to undertake; you are fairly sure that you will fit in somewhere to make a reasonable success of life. But you have not ended your education.

Experience has shown that five years in business or profession generally reveals even to a college graduate that there is no magic in four years of college which enables him to meet with grace, dignity, and satisfaction the problems which confront him. He then either comes to the conclusion that college, after all, isn't worth while, except maybe for its alleged social prestige, or he betakes himself diligently and properly to use a well-trained mind in continuing his education either for practical or cultural purposes. But why the lag of five years? A railroad engineer says that once the Twentieth Century Limited is going full speed, it costs fifty dollars each time it stops. What he probably means is that it costs that much to stop it and start it up again. A train is not the only thing which is expensive to stop and to start again.

The idea of finality in any division of our educational process must be discarded. Those who provide for the activities of the undergraduate must more and more shape curricula not as complete units but as parts of a process continuing steadily after graduation and leading to a fuller and richer life. That a great number of college graduates really do leave their institutions with a distinct aversion to books, study, and learning, is a serious charge against present educational methods and teachers.

Much of the need for adult education is not purely vocational. In fact, it is erroneous to enforce an arbitrary distinction between vocational and non-vocational interests. The work to which we devote our labor and the living we get from it are but one continuous process looked at from opposite ends. Men and women confronted with narrow and specialized services during their working hours, deprived

of any creative satisfaction, of any stamp of their individual skill and ability on a product, are trying to secure something to round out their intellectual lives, in many cases by using their occupations as a center from which to reach some understanding of the past and present. In cities there are many places for such people to find intellectual stimulation, but for the fifty million people in rural communities and areas there are formidable obstacles to carrying out one's interest, desire, and will to learn. And this progression and enlargement of life cannot come from applied science alone. Neither can it come wholly from the fruits of one's vocation. There must be such things as philosophy, art, literature. Religion, inside and outside the church, involving as it does, an intellectual effort to comprehend the what, why, and how of everything, is a progressive and enlarging factor of life. Hence religious organizations have a part to play in adult education.

After sixteen or more years of training in study, classroom, and college library, the college graduate naturally turns to books for guidance—and in the United States there exists for his benefit a unique institution found in no other country of the world—the free public library, which with all its shortcomings is probably the greatest reservoir for continuing education. Within the past fifteen years college trustees and administrators have come to realize that intellectual relations with their students should not end at Commencement Day. Alumni organizations, once devoted largely to merry-making, fund-raising, football, and reminiscent fellowship are now becoming educational service agencies through which graduates carry on reading or study programs adapted to their individual needs in new business or in making life more worth living. The utility and success of such efforts rest upon the awareness of the graduate.

But even in having books accessible, there are handicaps. There are perils of literacy as well as of illiteracy. In this day of printing gone wild, we are flooded with books of every quality. Critical choice is necessary. Libraries try

to make up our minds for us in advance as to what we shall read, book clubs try to do our selecting; publishers, by advertising and clap-trap, force their publications upon us, until even one who realizes his need for books is forced to wander in a labyrinth. It must be thankfully admitted that experience in reading may gradually build up a capacity for intelligent choice. Many libraries, too, are adding to their staffs capable people for the purpose of aiding isolated individuals by correspondence to make the desired acquaintances with stimulating and helpful books. Colleges are beginning to designate members of their staff to provide guidance lectures, reading lists, consultation, etc. to individual alumni and to alumni groups.

Separately endowed institutions and organizations solely for adult education are far away. Government and trust funds are still concerned and will, for many years, be concerned with extending opportunities for formal schooling and research, but, in many places, it is certainly possible at present for university and state extension agencies to aid informal community groups, where there is a concerted desire, to map out vocational and non-vocational activities. But one thing is clear; you must decide whether you are to live among the cobwebs in the basement, or on the upper floors in the clear light and air.

Up to this point I have tried to point out to you the constant and rapid movement of knowledge, and the means by which adults try to continue their education. As for you who are about to be graduated, for the past four years the teachers on this campus have been engaged in a desperate and losing struggle to out-guess the student. Behind the doors of the faculty room, there have been ardent discussions of academic efficiency, standardization, aptitudes, selective admission, education for citizenship, training for world leadership, the religious impulse, education for symmetry, social and civic responsibility, practicalizing the social sciences, reciprocity, development of personality, creative education, comprehensive examinations, honors, ath-

leties, chapel attendance, freedom of thought, speech, and action, the educational value of beauty, student-faculty relationship—and even of shall teachers teach? The faculty has enjoyed this immensely and so, I think, have you. Despite the educational traffic rules, the whistles and shouts of faculty policemen, despite the blinking academic signal lights, the one-way streets, the no-left, no-right turns, despite the strident racket of extra-curricular activities, you have picked your leisurely way to a college degree and probably to the essentials of an education. But you may not have discovered the social purpose of this training. The purpose of this education has been neither the storing up of information in memory nor the building of habits of right conduct. As Cardinal Newman has said: "A university education is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspirations, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life."

This makes education a means of satisfying man's aspirations toward whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, pure, lovely, and of good report. Under such a conception, education in college or beyond is a continuing social enterprise of first magnitude, demanding the mobilization of all the higher forces of society, and in it you, as graduates of the University of New Mexico, have a part to take.